



Godinez: DOC chief says there is a plan

November 5, 2013

The recently published editorial, “Ask the bigger question about prison funding,” contained no data or other factual support for its contentions about many topics. Safety in Illinois Department of Corrections prisons, overtime costs, savings from facility closures and inmate population vs. capacity were just some of those.

First and foremost, The Southern’s statement that, “we have little doubt that dangerous pressure is building within the system,” is irresponsible and inflammatory. What danger? No information was offered in substantiation. In fact, as reported in The Southern on October 19th, serious assault on staff in Illinois prisons was down and serious assaults of all types were down 35 percent for the fiscal year ending in June. That downward trend continues.

The Illinois Department of Corrections enforces a zero-tolerance policy regarding inmate behavior. Even minor contact with a correctional officer such as spitting, flipping away an inmate name tag or throwing food which might touch an officer’s foot is classified as assault. Referring to these as assaults inflates the total number, which is unflattering, but inmates know that even slight behavior issues will hurt earned time. Calling them out on small matters keeps them in line, which is why overall serious assaults are down.

The ratio of inmate incidents relative to population is among the lowest in the nation, and our Investigations and Intelligence division aggressively pursues any whisper of a problem. For instance, cell phones are prohibited for inmates because they help gang-related activity. In the past two years, Department investigators have found only 29 phones among inmates. California discovered 3,000 in just the past year-and-a-half; 900 were found last year in Texas.

The Southern asks “What happened to the savings...from closing Tamms...” and other Illinois Department of Corrections facilities. What happened is, those savings occurred and are building by \$5.83 million every month,

\$70 million on an annualized basis. A one-time loss of \$30 million in savings was due to the lawsuit filed by the employees union, AFSCME, which delayed the closures for seven months.

As for overtime, the higher amount paid during fiscal year 2013 was caused by various reasons: staff attendance; AFSCME’s lawsuit, preventing employee transfers into many needed positions which then had to be covered by overtime; attrition increases with staff concerned about pensions. Also, our contract with AFSCME required that many slots could not be filled during that time with those employees on leave. Again, overtime covered.

Overtime figures for fiscal year 2013 were compared by The Southern to 2007, but the piece failed to note the increase since then of more than 3,300 (eight percent) in our inmate population. Also missing was any reference to attrition; about 1,000 fine officers and other staff retire annually. Cadet classes are needed to help fill those vacancies, so overtime remains a component. However, as the Associated Press reported in The Southern on October 28th, the Department has saved \$3 million in fiscal year 2014 overtime and the savings are expected to total \$20 million, dropping us to at or below 2012 levels.

As for us “... holding nearly 49,000 inmates ... system built to hold 32,000 ...,” that is an often-heard misconception. The 32,000 rated capacity originated back when prisons had one-inmate-per-cell, a practice not used today anywhere in the United States.

With standard double-celling, our operational capacity is around 49,000.

We are not overcrowded. Extra room? No. But we have enough space to house all inmates safely, with everything expected in a humane system.

Finally, we agree when The Southern says, “Illinois needs a plan for its prison system.” That is why we have one.

It was formulated in 2012 and is on our web site, with portions posted in every Department facility. The Illinois Department of Corrections Strategic Plan describes how this agency shall manage inmate population, deal with budget constraints and continue to increase successful reentry of offenders into society. Conditions are constantly changing and the Plan has sufficient flexibility to respond.

Such foresight ensures the Illinois Department of Corrections will continue operating safely and efficiently.

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